



Yoruba Royal Ceremonial Robe (Circa 1940)

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dialogue

ON "FIRST WORD,"
JANUARY 1993

I read Don Cosentino's "First Word" and I was moved by it. I have asked similar questions of Africa-and-the-world recently, not just in the area of arts but her entire cultural heritage. Some of my questioning has been motivated by the Martin Bernal syndrome in our communities and schools, some by reflections in the commercial press like those in *Time* that Cosentino cites; but most poignantly by my return to Nigeria in 1991 and again in January this year. My 1991 trip was my first since 1976—fifteen years' absence. And those were important years. In the mid-1970s everyone was looking forward to better times; now everyone has known better times. My 1991 experience was a sad one, my 1993 trip even sadder, as things are visibly deteriorating.

And West Africa's and Nigeria's noble heritage (noble, and *real, documented*—damn it, as G. I. Jones said to an enthusiastic audience of students at the University of Ibadan in 1954, we don't *have* to go to Egypt or even further, and wrestle with history, and speculate; the complex, rich, sophisticated, glorious roots of West African and Afri-

can-American culture are *right here*)...where is it? It's hard to find, and once found, it can be identified only by one who has had direct experience of a culture that lived it, twenty and more years ago; one cannot interpret it by reference to current popular sentiment. The exhibits in the National Museum and in the small museums in state capitals seem of some other world, not at all related to, or relevant to, this one.

This is not dreamy nostalgia. The sentiments expressed in the January "First Word" are important, very important. Cosentino speaks for a whole generation, on both sides of the Atlantic. I hope he is heard. I suggest his thoughts become the theme of a symposium, the proceedings of which should then become a book. At least, I hope they stimulate something, that they don't just get filed away with that issue.

Phillips Stevens, Jr.
State University of New York at Buffalo

THEORETICAL ANGST AND
THE MYTH OF DESCRIPTION

...the beard-growers and gown wearers were judged for historical accuracy and for innovation and uniqueness.

(parade Grand Marshal discussing
Fourth of July festivities in
Bloomington in a *Sunday Herald-Times*
article by Kelly Rota)

We want it clear, goodness knows, but we also want it thick, and we get the thickness in the human consciousness that entertains and records, that amplifies and interprets...

(Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* by Henry James, p. 256)

Only shallow people insist on disbelief. You and I know better. We understand how reality is invented. A person sits in a room and thinks a thought and it bleeds out into the world.

(Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, p. 132)

In the sixties art history's emphasis on formalism and artistic biography, with its attendant interest in connoisseurship, left Africanists wondering how the discipline could contribute to a humanistic understanding of art in the hands and the minds of people. We responded with a renewed and vigorous interest in the contexts of art, and studied those contexts with the same sorts of ethnographic approaches used by anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and folklorists.

Now Africanists have a new kind of opportunity. The ways we work place us in a position not occupied by other areas of art history, or other branches of the humanities for that matter. And I think that gives us the opportunity to establish a particular kind of usefulness for theory.

The broader field of art history has for the longest time been embroiled in a prickly debate about theory. The debate reached Africanist art history slowly, after a good many years of swirling about in other corners of the humanities-social sciences continuum such as anthropology and literary criticism. As recently as 1988 Norman Bryson made a comment that illuminates the situation.

...the discipline of art history, having for so long lagged behind, having been among the humanities perhaps the slowest to develop and the last to hear of changes as these took place among even its closest neighbours, is now unmistakably beginning to alter. One index of change is the number of new journals that in the past ten years, and strikingly in the past five, have appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, journals that explicitly go beyond the discipline's status quo...

(Bryson 1988:xiii)

The debate focuses on the nature of the status quo, and it can be quite heated. A large number of non-Africanists rail vociferously against theoretical approaches to the study of art that go against what they consider to be the straightforward acquisition of facts, while another non-Africanist group views the first as dinosaurs incapable of interesting or useful research. These points of view can divide departments into political camps that battle stridently over such things as the kinds of graduate students that should be admitted and the kinds of guest speakers that should be invited. In other words both the day-to-day workings and the general character of departmental life are profoundly affected by these battles. The issues involved are no less prominent in many museums, where the nature of exhibitions like "The West as America" has been influenced considerably by particular theoretical dispositions, and the controversy stirred up by the shows invokes battling theoretical (and ideological) points of view. Dealers and collectors are also part of this debate over theory, and in the end what the public gets to see and read is very much affected by it.

Nestled in between these lovers and haters of theory, Africanists often fall into a third group, one that has cautiously begun to apply theoretical points of view to the data gleaned from observation and description, and one that has also become increasingly sensitive to issues involving the nature of research and researchers. This middle ground holds a great deal of potential for study in the arts, because it offers opportunities to explore the usefulness of theory from vantage points that are more practical than the two warring points of view.

But Africanists are also in another very interesting position, one that has to do with the nature of interdisciplinary approaches. We have rather different bedfellows from those of our non-Africanist colleagues. In fact Africanist art history is by no means dominated by art historians, and it is not to be taken lightly that an art historian serves as curator at the National Museum of Natural

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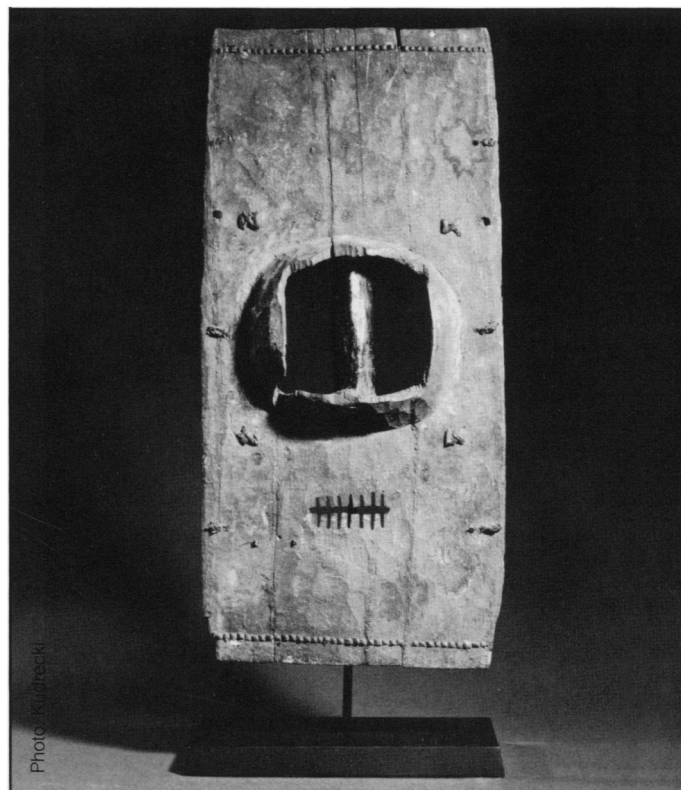
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History and an anthropologist serves as curator at the National Museum of African Art.

When historians of Western art turn to theory, they most frequently seek camaraderie in the ideas of literary criticism, philosophy, film theory, art criticism, and psychoanalytic psychology. Good examples of this can be found in various recent publications that bring several fields together. For example, *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis in 1984, includes six art historians and seven art critics, three writers and three artists, three literary critics, two film theorists, one philosopher, and one sociologist. *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, edited by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey in 1991, includes seven art historians, five philosophers, four literature scholars, one historian, one member of a psychology department, and one anthropologist.

Most non-Africanist art historians traveling in fields outside their own favor what they seem to consider a natural kinship. They look to disciplines that emphasize the abstract analysis of things people make, with a certain deemphasis on people.

Africanists, on the other hand, have for a good many decades been most closely aligned with anthropologists and sociologists (and to a lesser extent archaeologists, historians, and folklorists). We work more frequently with living art traditions, and so we work with people. Naturally, then, we tend to find interdisciplinary camaraderie with researchers

who also focus on people, and on the things people do with the things they make. In many ways this changes the emphasis and tone of the theoretical positions Africanist art historians and anthropologists are inclined to develop, perhaps because we are more accustomed to considering the complexities and contradictions of actual human behavior.

What Africanists Can Do

If the work of broader art history aims to tell what art is really about and how it fits into culture and societies, then its findings must be compatible with what we learn about how people think and act. The theoretical perspectives that art historians are lately adopting must offer insights and avenues of approach into the minds and actions of people, as individuals and in groups. More than any other segment of African studies, ours can produce research that will help determine that.


But we Africanists have some work to do to enhance our capabilities. We have been slow to acknowledge the potential usefulness of theory, and a good many of us in fact still have not. And, like our Western-oriented counterparts, many of us have also failed to realize that observation and description are more than methodologies, they are theoretical positions with serious consequences.

In this column I want to consider two aspects of theory, from the vantage point of an Africanist who believes that all of our research is grounded in theoretical assertions and that

we can put theory to positive use without becoming mindless converts to someone else's points of view. I will address the angst of scholars who insist theory is irrelevant, and the myth that observation and description are straightforward approaches to research. At the same time I will examine ways in which I think theory can help us develop a better understanding of the role of the researcher, the character of data, and the complex nature of human ideas and behavior. It will be obvious that to some extent I am also criticizing Africanists, and where I do I do not exclude myself, because I have most certainly done plenty of the things I think we should forego.

Assertions and Fictions

We can identify status quo scholars in the broader byways of art history as those who adhere to four principal assertions. First, they proclaim—stridently or demurely—that art history should avoid theoretical approaches to examining artistic phenomena, because theory is just a collection of other people's ideas, which will act like screens that twist and skew any information passed through them. Second, they construe our most pertinent information to be the product of careful observation and description of artistic (and social) phenomena. Third, they assume we are capable of discovering vantage points within societies from which we can observe and describe objectively. Fourth, they proceed as if it is tacitly obvious that what we should and can




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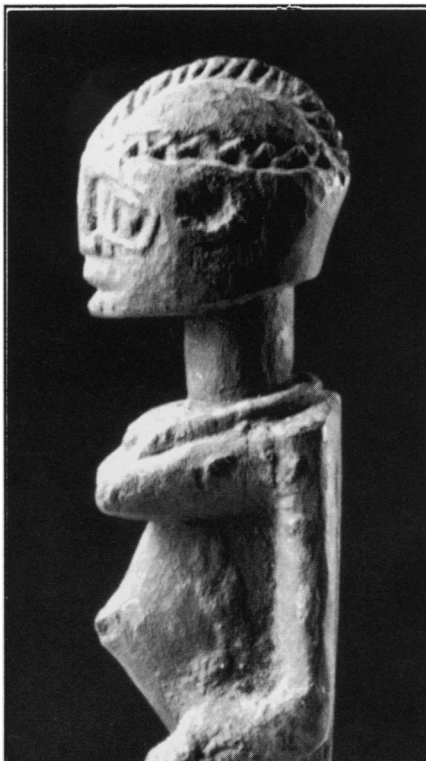
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observe and describe are the rules and norms, the shared beliefs and practices, that we imagine glue a society together and generate the meanings and uses of artworks. Such rarified materials as those allegedly provided by Marcel Griaule's legendary Ogotomméli are interesting but of little use to us, because they do not represent what groups such as the Dogon really think, or at least what we assume most Dogon really think.

Each of these assertions contains some truth. For example, certainly it is important to try in every way possible to be perceptive and accurate, impartial and thorough, and certainly we must do all we can to understand the artistic and social ideas that people in a society share. But each of these assertions is also fictitious; or, more accurately, each perpetuates a fiction that weakens art history's work.

Angst about Theory

The first assertion, that theory is dangerous, has become highly contentious and volatile. At every conference, at every meeting of minds—at every opportunity—many art historians seem intent upon bashing any colleague who might attempt a move into those troubled waters where scholars engage the issues and ideas that populate the multiple realms of theory in the humanities and social sciences today. Any colleague who might suggest we ought to stop wading and start swimming risks becoming the subject of mistrust and ridicule.

We have all sorts of ways to abuse theory. We can assess it as trendy and ephemeral, as a convoluted mess of verbal gymnastics that the self-proclaimed elite of academe invent to create their own secret societies and get a lot of grant money, leaving the real world to us plain-talking, straight-shooting regular working stiff.

There is certainly some truth in that assessment. Often enough as we read through the decon-post-praxis-subjectivist-semio-potpourri (it's a jungle out there), we encounter what seems for all the world to be just adventures in poetry or academic wish fulfillment. Sometimes it even seems like hogwash. And frequently, depending on what version or author you read, theories, from post-structuralism to reader-response, seem to be common sense writ outrageously complex and reified.

Why dignify such stuff? Why slog through its jargon and why try to assess the usefulness of applying such will-o'-the-wisp fabrications to our materials?

There are at least two good reasons. First, it is wise to know what the competition is doing, what the big scholars (like the "Big Men" in New Guinea) are thinking and how they are expressing their thoughts. The nature of academe is discourse—the exchange of ideas, and their examination, synthesis, and evaluation in the face of what we think we have found in the world. When we refuse to read theorists or entertain their suggestions, we diminish ourselves while remaining unable to refute them in any justifiable or reliable way.

Second, the value of theory does not reside in its creation of systems that we can all use to

get our interpretations of data right. Some scholars might choose to adopt another scholar's system of analysis and collection of assumptions, but there is absolutely no need to do so. After all, theories are collections of ideas that other individuals have assembled and refined on the basis of their experiences and contemplation. Why should they necessarily apply to the area or the art you seek to understand? One of the most interesting theorists working today, Anthony Giddens, states that theory conceived of as broadly applicable laws and generalizations is a notion of rather limited use (1984:xviii-xx). And we often see that the devotees of any particular theory, the followers who apply someone else's work to their own material with too much gusto and not enough reflection, are frequently the authors we find most dogmatic and least useful. Theory swallowed whole is the formulaic denial of thought, and it is one of the worst things we can do to understand human minds, social groups, and art.

But theory can be the opportunity to gain perspectives and insights, and the chance to see if they might not suggest a means by which we can understand better some aspect of art with which we are struggling. I don't see why we should ask anything more of theory, or why that would not seem valuable enough all by itself.

I am entertained but not certain of the value rendered in the infinity of nuances Michel Foucault articulates to tell us about his view of signs and their transformations in seventeenth-century Europe (1973:46-76). I am impressed with Laura Mulvey's renowned indictment of the politics of Western male pleasure in the cinema, but not convinced that the image of women as the threat of castration can ever play a big role in my thinking, or is even that powerful an explanatory principle for exploring cinematic sexism (1975:6-14, 17-18). I am intrigued to read that post-structuralists such as Jacques Lacan moved beyond existentialism's interest in the individual as a conscious actor to posit that there is no separation between the self and society and that people are constituted by language (Sarup 1989:7). But I will not incorporate such an idea into my own work, because my experiences with Mande and with art lead me to think that it leaves out the crucial aspect of who composes society and creates the meanings we share or transform with language, and that it misunderstands the nature of thought and action, and constrains our understanding of history.

I am not anxious to struggle through the multiple works of Giddens, to sort out all the ways he obscures or contradicts himself, making life complicated for readers. But I am interested in the essence of Giddens's idea of structuration, which is his assessment of how people use rules and materials (be they concrete or conceptual) to create the things we sometimes call social formations: things such as religious institutions and their multiple components, things such as sculptures and clothes, and things such as the systems of interpretation local people or researchers create to evaluate artworks or activities. The



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**Joan Barist
Primitive Art**

more I think about my experiences with Mande people, the more I think I can adapt (slant, twist, transform) many aspects of Giddens's structuration theory to examine and perhaps understand how Mande use form and aesthetics in their lives.

I am also interested in examining Giddens, for example, against the other scholars I find helpful, to see how they might support one another on various themes and issues, and to see if there are things they all discuss, each from their own vantage points and experiences, that could be synthesized and adjusted to give me more purchase in understanding why and how people use art. Like other scholars, I have puzzled and wondered and worried over the things that art can be and do. So I add my own ideas to those I read about and consider the effects they have upon each other. That, in a nutshell, is how I use theory. And I will go further and say I think that is how we all should use theory.

Myths about Description

Now we come to the second, third and fourth assertions I introduced above: that observation and description generate straightforward and accurate information; that objective vantage points can be obtained for such procedures; and that rules, norms, consensus and shared beliefs and practices should constitute the core of that description. While there is value and veracity in these assertions, they are not simple truths or common-sense pronouncements about good research. Rather they are theoretical presumptions, assumed positions, hypothetical assertions that weave a theoretical web around the practice of our discipline. And often the people who make these assertions most central in their work or proclaim their value most vociferously to their colleagues are the same people who take the greatest offense to what they consider the insolence of blatant theorists. In other words they blind themselves to the theoretical nature of their own approach and fail to recognize its limitations and liabilities, while insisting that other people's theories are wrong-headed or overbearing. Is there not something paradoxical in this?

We can explain the paradox ironically by referring to theory, specifically, the idea of naturalizing ideologies; that is, the idea that people grouped into collectives (from small ones such as Elks lodges, Komo associations, or Africanist art historians, to large ones such as the American middle class or Bamana Muslims) share collections of beliefs and activities that serve to reinforce the notion that other of their beliefs and activities are natural, normal, and simply the way things should be. The exploitation, destruction, and conversion associated with Europe's colonialization of African peoples were justified through naturalizing ideologies that asserted a superior, more enlightened civilization for Europeans and then concluded that it was only natural for such favored creatures to rule the world's less favored ones.

The three assertions we now discuss have been crafted—by happenstance, accident,

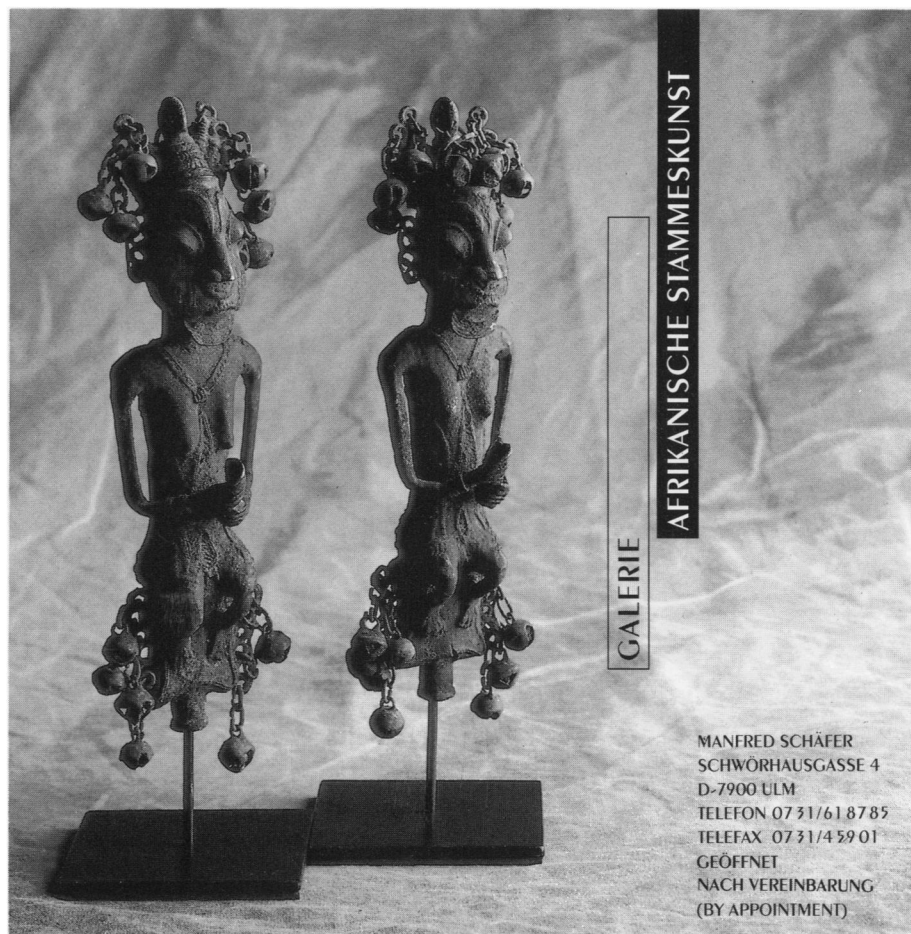
and design—into naturalizing ideologies for mainstream art historians. These scholars do not question their validity or see them in the light of Western intellectual history. Instead they just accept them as fact, as natural ways for researchers to work, as self-evident truths involving the ways people think and act, and the ways we can know how other people think and act.

These assertions might even seem refreshing in the face of much of art history's own history. In *Rethinking Art History* Donald Preziosi made the theoretical nature of our discipline his point of departure for exploring and critiquing the field. But we should not need anyone to tell us our field is theoretical. From its wellsprings to its more recent practitioners, art history has been awash in theoretical assumptions and propositions. Read any section of Michael Podro's *The Critical Historians of Art* (1982), for example, or read Keith Moxey on Panofsky (1985), or Arthur Danto on Moxey, or E. H. Gombrich on Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz (1979), and the theoretical backbone of art history becomes absolutely clear. To scholars of a phenomenalist bent, stepping back from deep theory to the seemingly more direct and positivistic activity of "objectively observing and describing rules and norms" could be like participating in a bracing rite of spring.

But it only appears to be more direct and objective. The problem is that these three assertions are grounded in a whole slew of additional assumptions, such as: the way to be objective is to record things meticulously, or (for non-Africanists) written documentation can be taken as truth, or (for Africanists) if you are careful people will tell you the truth, or the vested interests of art users and art researchers are obvious and easily taken into account, or what we see and what people tell us are all we need in order to understand social, intellectual and psychological phenomena. If I ask graduate students to reflect on their experiences in life, and then consider these assumptions in light of those experiences, they invariably find the assumptions unrealistic, even peculiar. Yet we all know colleagues in colleges and museums who just cannot view them as anything other than obvious truths.

Of course we can and do observe and describe—things, situations, events—we do it all the time. We are in fact so accustomed to these second-nature activities, upon which so much of our everyday discourse rests, that we rarely think about the assumptions or the implications of their enactment. Furthermore, our mainstream American styles of socialization as well as many of our post-Enlightenment public ideologies encourage us to presume that the products of observation and description will by and large be representative of the real world. We observe, we describe, and life proceeds as if we were doing something right. Why, one of Western civilization's most cherished and idealized forms of enterprise, science, is often said to be grounded in these acts.

But the assertion that information is reasonably generated by observation and description bears a fiction that we can jettison



just by considering what Michael Baxandall says about a relatively basic kind of description, that of a painting, a material object in space (1985:1–5). To describe an artwork you must first formulate and focus your thoughts, and as soon as you do that you bring your experiences and interests into play. The description that results may well generate visions in listeners, but it probably will not allow them to visualize the actual artwork.

That is true even of straightforward descriptions. Baxandall suggests that descriptions of artworks are representations of thought about having viewed the objects described, and if you have ever asked students to describe museum pieces you know this to be true. Even trained and seasoned describers of objects bring their own interests and experiences to bear on the task. And so they make choices that influence the description and make basic accuracy a rather shadowing, relational thing. Thus observation and description are not simply common-sense tools for the acquisition and presentation of information. They are proclamations grounded in the theoretical assertion that what we can see and hear and report on with these techniques are the appropriate and important information of art history.

The experiences of Africanists make it harder to see description as straightforwardly informative and uncontentious. While an object in space would seem to be a comparatively easy thing to describe, how can we

construe the idea of accuracy in descriptions of social actions or interpretations of meanings in symbolic forms? Those kinds of events combine and compound the interests and experiences of at least two parties, and the thing being described may not actually even be wholly visible to the observer.

Here the full panoply of human aspirations, ideologies, expertise, and access come powerfully into play. When art is busy being used, bearing a load of function and meaning for people who have put it to work, the situations in which the art is invoked and all the indigenous decisions that inform it constitute a complex event. How can those situations be observed accurately, and how does one observe anything but the tangible physical and social artifacts of thought, evaluation, and decision-making? Here accuracy becomes emphatically perspectival, and the only way our descriptions can be useful is if we acknowledge and explore the perspectives at play. But all too often these events are described as if they were almost mindlessly simple, and eminently subject to our shrewd powers of observation. Such description assumes accuracy to be a virtual given, and proceeds from there to ignore much of the conceptual complexity and ambiguity that give artworks and art events a substantial amount of their richness and utility, to say nothing of their efficacy and power.

Art history's manner of putting observations together into descriptions often leads to

Continued on page 82

sionally. But when we did I would spread pillows on the floor and settle in for an hour, for an hour and a half, for the spring that would be visited upon me as we talked and thought about what each of us had new to offer. I'm looking out my study window now, in the full beauty of a southern Indiana spring. There are reds and yellows and greens and whites all across my field of vision. Lovely little cardinals keep flying in front of me. There is a beech tree just beyond some evergreens and my fence. It is still mostly branches without leaves, but it is radiating bright solidarity and a special kind of grace. And I'm thinking of the place where what I have become began. I'm thinking of Sylvia and how we've all lost her.

Now, in my own Indiana spring, as I drive the country roads that take my sons to school, through purples and pinks and the strange, beautiful songs of woodpeckers; now, as I pass by the quiet tree-ringed waters of the little lake where I sometimes fish and think—in the midst of these things Sylvia glows like the trees I see, and I wish I could talk to her again. I wish I could tell her what she was to me.

Sylvia wrote a travel book. I wonder how many people know that. It is called *West African Travels: A Guide to People and Places*, and it takes you to an Africa that she invented. It is an Africa crystallized momentarily from her experiences and her intelligence. It is a collection of places full of romance and wonder, poignancy and power, thoughtfulness and introspection. It is a place very much like the place another wonderful person who has died created, the Mande singer and philosopher Seydou Camara, a person of thought and awe like Sylvia, who used to use his art, as Sylvia did, to try to make other people smarter. That shimmering, mindful Africa is the place I tell my students to go, a place to find yourself. A place to grow.

Sylvia wrote another book, supposedly as an art historian. But categories like that should often be broken, and her book becomes a strategy. It shows how ideas can be strung together and laced to make a way of seeing and of being in the world worthwhile. It is a vision momentarily crystallized from Sylvia's experiences and her intelligence, and you can think about the parts that affect you the most and put them to work for you. She would have loved that.

Sylvia overflowed with marvel. And she was intense in so articulate a way that you were hard pressed not to be affected by her. Sylvia was a person of dignity and intelligence. She was seclusive and did not impose herself on you. But the people she touched know more of life because of her, know more about themselves and about what we all could be.

More people like Sylvia in this world, many more people like Sylvia, would make it a better place. Sylvia made it a better place.

There is a hole in the world when someone like Sylvia leaves. There is a hole in me.

Patrick McNaughton

generalizations, and the theoretical underpinnings of this approach assert that generalizations are a proper means of understanding. To some degree they are, but they have serious limitations and can in fact lead to profound misunderstanding. I can expound all I want on the general meanings and functions of the Mande Komo association and its masquerades, and so can the Mande who talk to me about them. I can talk about clarity and obscurity as general principles of Mande aesthetics, and be to some degree correct (McNaughton 1979, 1982a, 1982b, 1988). Such generalizations are useful, but they can be ignored or even abused by artists and clients who choose to do so, and that very clearly constitutes another significant form of usefulness that I need to consider. Generalizations about Komo are also useful. But they are also just fodder for the actual Komo leaders and dancers and general membership in each branch, who will stage and interpret specific performances on the basis of their interests, experiences, and the nature of the situation that has inspired the performance. Thus generalizations are conventions, or guidelines, parameters, points of departure that have been established historically and will be evaluated and quite possibly transformed as each performance becomes a part of Komo's history. I need to remember and acknowledge that when I generalize about Komo.

There is much Mande evidence that corroborates the need to treat generalized descriptions as partial and contingent. Years ago Charles Bird noted that expert bards, the poet-historians of Mande, break the aesthetics and poetics of their profession quite purposefully, and pronouncedly. That is what you do when you're good (Bird 1976, especially p. 91). Mary Jo Arnoldi's forthcoming book on youth association masquerade performances makes this same sort of point: masks and puppets are flexible vehicles whose specific meanings and uses are adjusted to specific situations. Generalized descriptions that neglect those adjustments and situations will miss much of what makes art a part of life, and much of what makes art important. Barbara Hoffman's dissertation describes at length a specific bard event in which an especially important rule (generalization, convention, parameter, guideline) of performance behavior was literally trashed. That rule, the proceedings that abused it, and the activities that resulted from the abuse are each important, and together present a scenario that indeed involves human aspirations, ideologies, expertise, and access in a complex web that was both subtle and bold.

Because art, thought, and social life are so intimately intertwined, this particular event, richly examined by Hoffman, demonstrates the serious limitations of other scholarly works that are grounded in the assertion that information is composed of straightforward observation and description. Had Hoffman been content to use that assertion, and willing to use other scholars' generalizations about bardic events, she likely would have

concluded that the event she observed had gone dreadfully wrong and was a bad example of its genre. Or she would have had to describe the event as an anomaly, with no better way to understand it. But Hoffman went beyond the event's description, giving us the opportunity to see how rules and expectations, goals and consequences impinge upon one another in complicated orchestrations that make life interesting.

Hoffman's, Arnoldi's, and Bird's work on Mande take us past basic observation and description. They offer richer, more insightful, more accurate and useful information by providing deeper levels of description that involve careful analysis and the very judicious use, here and there, of what mainstream Africanists would call theory. Yes, they observe and describe, but they do so in a sophisticated way that involves several levels of engagement. Yes, they offer generalizations, but they are generalizations that penetrate the often misleading surface of events and objects, to arrive at a level of analysis that offers more explanatory power. While denying the potential of theory and failing to realize that observation and description are theoretical approaches, far too many scholars remain right at the surface of what they seek to understand, and end up promoting a great deal of misunderstanding.

I have talked to scholars whose own work does not address these complexities, not that everybody necessarily should. But sometimes they suggest that the people they study are just not like Mande: their society is simpler, more conservative, less subject to internal discourse and disagreement, more fixed, less prone to associating artworks with multiple agendas. That may well be true, and I am not in the best position to judge. Yet the same kinds of things were said about Mande societies before careful researchers began to scratch beneath the surface impressions gleaned from straightforward observation and description. So when scholars say the society they work with is simpler or more rigid, I wonder if perhaps it isn't the method of examination that is simple or rigid.

This is much like the issue of a word for art. For the longest time scholars insisted that Mande were far too practical to have a word like our word for art. Then in southern Mali Kate Ezra noticed Bamana elders discussing art with the phrases *mafilè fèn*, *fleli fèn*, and *lajè fèn*, which mean "something to look at" or "something to see." Ezra notes that these words "convey the idea that art, for the Bamana, is something that attracts your attention, focuses your eye, and directs your thoughts" (1986:10).

This is significant, because so many scholars still recite what has become a kind of maxim asserted by outsiders about Africans, that they unlike us treat what we call art as a functional part of life, and so naturally have no special word that isolates it for contemplation. The degree to which this assertion misunderstands both African and Western art is staggering. Quite possibly it emerges from the observation and description approach, with its attendant limitations.

The very idea of art is complex and difficult to communicate (witness all the Western worry over how one defines the word). It is deeply grounded in the ideologies and practices, the contradictions and tensions, that constitute the ways societies do business. To expect a word like our word "art" to emerge directly or easily from cross-cultural observation and description is like looking at the outside of an automobile and expecting to understand the systems inside that make it move.

To understand the working parts you have to look into nooks and crannies, and you also have to know how to do things like unlock the hood. Art history's prominent use of observation and description has often resulted in a kind of complacency about how hard researchers must look and how much researchers must analyze. Many would deny this, but I think that it's true. Like the more universally acknowledged forms of theory, observation and description lull users into thinking they are getting the job done without putting much effort into reflection and analysis.

Embedded in the assertion that observation and description generate unencumbered data is the assertion that objective positions are available from which we may exercise our need to observe and describe. Available where, and how can we find them? Such scholars as Paul Stoller (in Stoller & Olkes 1987:9-11) have pointed out that informants are quite capable of lying, often for reasons we will not readily suspect or comprehend. And given all I've said above, I cannot think that objectivity will reside in the minds of carefully trained and responsible researchers. Michael Jackson puts it nicely when he notes in his introduction to *Paths Toward a Clearing*: "It is likely that 'objectivity' serves more as a magical token, bolstering our sense of self in disorienting situations, than as a scientific method for describing those situations as they really are" (1989:3). His introduction, and most of the book, provides example after example of this fact, while Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983) helps show how objectivity in our kind of work is really a theoretical assertion grounded in the intellectual and colonial history of the West.

Annette B. Weiner demonstrates the relative and relational nature of objectivity in a wonderfully circumspective way, by comparing her own research efforts with the Trobriand Island people of New Guinea to those of Bronislaw Malinowski (1988:1-9). Anita Glaze's work on Senufo woman power in the arts is equally enlightening, as she notes that "from the literature one would think that Senufo art is essentially a man's world" (1975:26), when in fact it most certainly is not.

The books that account for their authors in the midst of research make excellent reading in this regard. From the insightful early work of Elenore Smith Bowen (Laura Bohannan) to the more recent but equally valuable volumes by Carol Spindel, Paul Stoller, Alma Gottlieb, and Philip Graham,

these works show the interactive and ever-changing perspectives created in research environments. Just the list of players is impressive: artists, dancers, cult administrators, local cultural affairs officers, art traders, town chiefs, senior cult members, neophytes, elder members of communities, *yeyes* (what Malians used to call hip young people whose personal images were stylized "antitraditional"), and researchers. And each of these characters possess expectations and aspirations, expertise and competence, allegiances and commitments that come into dynamic play whenever the researcher talks to someone or tries to watch something.

Where in all that dynamic, contentious space are there places for us to create objective vantage points? And what resources could we possibly use to create them—our neutral, level-headed training received from detached advisors amicably situated in the politics-free environments that are our universities and museums? Jackson makes the point that "concepts do not transcend this life-world," and that is as true of the theoretical constructs that assert the objectivity of observation and description as it is of those that proclaim the virtues of post-structuralism or reader-response criticism. Jackson goes on to say that concepts "cannot get us above or outside experience, only move us from one domain to another, making connections" (1989:20), and that is as true of people as it is of ideas. People, even researchers, are situated in specific space and their own particular histories, and the variables that stem from such situations can be shockingly pronounced, given the assumptions we humans make about the shared experiences that allow us to be social beings.

Objectivity is a noble idea, but it can never be a fact of life. To be sure, there is nothing more important than our responsibility as researchers to be as perceptive and accurate as we can possibly be. But part of that responsibility is to be aware of and explain our particular situatedness, every time we do research and every time we write it up. Then our readers can assess our work and the art it focuses on, and furthermore gain some purchase on the kinds of situations that can envelop encounters with art.

That is as true for non-Africanists working in libraries, archives, and museums as it is for Africanists working in the savannah or the forest. We should ascertain and state what motivates our angles of approach. And we should ascertain and state to the best of our abilities what has motivated our sources to speak or write as they have. I think every art historian, Africanist or non-, has much to gain from reading Ivan Karp and Kent Maynard's analysis of scholarly interpretations (1983), and Karp and Martha Kendall's examination of research reflexivity (1982).

That leads us to the fourth assertion I identified above, that we should seek norms and rules in our quest to understand the arts. Once again, there is a fiction involved. Norms and rules can be effervescent and easily transmuted by the people living them;

moreover they are easy to invent or overapplied. Pierre Bourdieu likens the predicament of researchers working in foreign cultures to people who "lack practical mastery of a highly valued competence and have to provide themselves with an explicit and at least semi-formalized substitute for it in the form of a repertoire of rules" (1977:2).

This strikes me as a most profound assessment. We did not learn to speak our native tongues or walk by following a carefully proscribed and systematic set of rules. We were simply submerged in needs, desires, and opportunities that led to our acquisition of the skills. That is even true, though less pronouncedly, for most of our adventures in learning to drive cars, manipulate word processing programs, or even speak second languages. Certainly we followed rules and systems that were offered as reasonable means to acquire these skills. But we internalized those skills, made them ours, by experiencing and mastering the confluences and contingencies of rules colliding with the worlds in which the skills are used. In short we learned best by doing, and that is also how we deeply learned our social skills and our knowledge of art. We may speak of rules, guidelines, recipes, and formulas when quizzed by foreign researchers, but those schemata are most often far more prominent in the minds of our inquisitors than in our own.

That kind of learning—using and doing—ultimately leads to a facility and confidence that moves rules and norms into the background, or specifically tags them as elements to be manipulated; they become a part of something much broader, less fixed and more amorphous than you might think when you read about Dogon social organization, for example, or the aesthetic principles of Mande sculpture.

For Africanists the notion of gerontocracy is a classic example. Who has not read that in this African society or that, the oldest person rules, be it a head of household or a town chief. Yet when you go to that place to do your own research, you find that this community chief is not the old fellow who was theoretically positioned for the task, and that family leader is the wrong age or the wrong gender, but seems to be doing the leading nevertheless. Often students respond to such situations by trying to figure out what went wrong. Ah, that is evidence of the breakdown of local norms under modern, Western pressures, someone might say, but it is wise to think twice before accepting such assessments. Better perhaps to recall the adage from our own neck of the woods that says rules are made to be broken.

The question then arises: which is more important to know, the rules or the ways people live them? In Mande aesthetics, should I focus on the norm about animal necks in sculpture, or on the individuals who put people's conception of the norm to the test by making animal necks very long, or on the responses people have to normal necks and long necks? In Mande symbolism, should I focus on the general cognitive and

emotional implications of animal horns in sculpture, or should I focus on the very different things horns will be to: an experienced herbal doctor, a hunter, a town leader who knows an ample amount of sorcery, a town leader who knows no sorcery, a young fellow soon to be initiated into Komo (where mask horns just don't get any bigger), and a youth association member who dances a horned mask that satirizes Komo?

I do not think you can reasonably answer one or the other. Many people everywhere in the world simply accept norms as the ways things should be done. But many people everywhere also defy, manipulate, and transform them for all kinds of interesting reasons and with all sorts of important skills and capacities. Equally significant, many people won't change them, but will contemplate the rules and norms they encounter in their lives, and that contemplation is an important part of living and thinking with art. Art, after all, is a significant form of thought, and if researchers ignore thought they run the terrible risk of beginning to see people as mindless automatons. From my perspective, when that happens I wonder why one would want to study art at all.

Komo masks are one of my favorite things, because they seem so loaded with contradictions. They are supposed to be exceptionally (you could say excessively) powerful and scary, but association members are quite willing to evaluate them in terms of their beauty. They are visually reduced configurations, subtracting essences from animals and recombining them in sculpture. At the same time they are conceptually complex configurations, bringing together those visual essences with the essences of many medicines and natural forces to create complicated fields of energy, intention, and contemplation.

I was always thrilled as a young dissertation researcher to learn how mushy and unstable Komo rules and norms were. The mask should look like this, but here is one that looks like that. Meetings should be now, but instead they are then. Sacrifices should be...well, it just depends...on circumstances. Leaders should be Bamana, but here is one who is Fula, for God's sake, which is to say, not even Mande.

How did I know Komo rules and norms? Partly because I read them in all that French colonial and anthropological literature, and partly because Mande told me them. So they were, but they weren't. They could be followed. Or they could be neglected. They could be used as social resources to garner authority. Or by breaking them they could be used as social resources to garner authority. Komo leaders and mask dancers could become famous by following the rules, or by not following the rules. It's not that rules and norms aren't there. It's that they have a subtler status, subtler meaning, than our frequent over-emphasis on them suggests.

Our discipline's quest for rules and norms (criteria of taste, authenticity, stylistic attributions, etc.), comes at the expense of people living them. Museum collections are populat-

ed with conventional pieces, at the expense of interesting pieces that seem to diverge from style central. This has surely led to some very poor assessments and no small amount of impoverished data on what art in life can be like. And it has certainly contributed to the dubious assessments we still hear, from non-Africanists and Africanists alike, about how African societies are conservative, rigid, and mutable only under unusual circumstances, or when Islam or Europeans arrive to spread their influence.

Such research behavior is as likely to distort what might be out there as any of the scholarly approaches we have branded most blatantly theoretical. The point is that mainstream art history researchers have chosen to value one cluster of theoretical positions over others, being surprisingly ignorant of the theoretical nature of their own choices.

Whatever form of theory we use, our job is to try to be as perceptive and analytical as we can. We need to consider carefully the situations in which we find art and the situations in which we find the people who make and use the art. And, with just as much attention to detail and critical acumen, we also need to consider our own situations, our training and experience and points of view, as persons who seek to understand art and share that understanding with others.

Patrick McNaughton
Indiana University
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STOLEN ART

The following objects were stolen, the first in 1987, the second in 1991:

- 1) Side-blown trumpet. Sierra Leone, probably Sherbro. Ivory (yellowish-light tan), approximate length 24" (61cm). Fluting on main body, incised decoration at tip and blow hole.
- 2) Elephant. Dan, Liberia/Côte d'Ivoire. Wood, approximate length 12" (30.5cm). Dark brown with red highlights, glossy patina. Wooden tusks are nailed separately to body, ears are incised.

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notes

ADAMS: Notes, from page 43

[This revised manuscript was accepted for publication in February 1993.]

I take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the Fulbright Commission for a research award (1989-90). The thesis of this article was first presented in a paper at an African Studies Association panel in 1988. Much of the data was first documented in my unpublished research journals of 1985 (nos. 5, 12) and 1989-90 (nos. 21-28). All statements made by residents of Canton Boo and quoted or paraphrased in this article were first recorded in those journals. For recent helpful criticism I thank Joan Bamberger and two anonymous reviewers.

1. For example: on house painting, Courtney-Clarke (1986, 1990); on Kuba textile decoration, Meurant (1986); on calabash ornamentation, Chappel (1977); and on personal adornment, Fisher (1984).

2. One study of calabash use and decoration (Berns & Hudson 1986), while not presenting gender as an issue, provides a good deal of information about women's roles and women's arts.

3. Another survey conducted in 1948, confined to eastern Liberia, includes the illustration of numerous wall paintings without indicating whether men or women painted them (Holas 1952:415-37).

4. The French colonial administrative authority became effective gradually in the 1920s, although some sectors were still under military surveillance in the '30s.

5. Amid laughter, some women recited a maxim that a man who climbs to the attic granary gets his buttocks struck by his wife's cooking ladle.

6. On rare occasions, Boo men add designs to the house walls. These are more likely to be human figures, animals, or occasionally an image or simply the name of Mammy Wata, a water spirit invoked for good fortune.

7. For a description of pottery making in this region, see Schwab (1947:131-34, fig. 63 a-e). His comments are based on his 1927 travels in northeastern Liberia among the Gbunde, Loma, Mano, and Gio (Dan); he included the Guéré in Liberia, whom he called the Tien after the name of the main town near the border of Côte d'Ivoire.

8. Schwab mentions that Dan women did not want to part with their prized pots (stored for festival use) because "no more like them were available" (Schwab 1947:131). In 1990 I also heard this kind of remark, which seems to be a way of phrasing admiration rather than a report on current lack of talent.

9. Poeh said potters followed two restrictions to avoid breakage: "Don't go near your husband (i.e., no sexual relations) and never use metal tools in the work, even to dig out the clay" (Adams 1989-90, no. 26:97). Among the half-Grebo, who are closely mingled with the Tien or southern Guéré, Schwab also notes the potters' avoidance of men before beginning their work (1947:131).

10. Large wooden containers for festival use are carved by men. The bowls are blackened and decorated with an arrangement of incised designs that closely resembles women's pottery. I believe pottery is the earlier model, as incised curvilinear zigzags are suited to working on clay surfaces, not wood carving.

11. One woman expert (Plon-Zo) who performs the operation and another knowledgeable elder said that in addition to making the girls pretty, painting their faces changed their usual aspect (*jeu zaa*, to ritualize), showing that the girls had been transformed by initiation (Adams 1991b).

12. Bohumil Holas's 1957 article on girls' initiation among the Oubi in the nearby Tai region indicated that initiates received the names of animals whose movements they conveyed in their dances at the coming-out ceremony. In 1992, at my request, Léonie Bonnéhin, a We-speaking botanist working in the Tai region, obtained the names and animal roles of the initiates in Figure 12, all but one of whom survive. Zébahi Agnès, head of initiation camp, is the first woman on the left in the back row; the names of the other instructors in cotton dresses are not known. Back row, left to right: Fahé Cathérine, Buffalo (Dyi); Diéhi, Mask (Glàè); Dégnan, Drummer (Koutéhé); Pehi Cécile, Elephant (Doè). Front row, left to right: Dazahon Thérèse, Leopard (Dji); Oulai Gouley, Angry Ram (Téhé blàè); Ouly, Lamb Pursued by Leopard (Blàè Djouhou); Gnenonkongue, Monkey (Képè).

13. This spelling of the term is improved from *woodhoe*, which I used in an earlier publication (Adams 1986:54).

14. The division of responsibilities between male and female domains paired with claims of uniquely male leadership and control is encountered in many societies; this asymmetry appears natural by suppressing awareness of the inherent contradiction.

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Cavendish (1586), and the Cumberland expedition (1586).
10. Presents were exchanged between Fenton's expedition in 1582 and an African chief called Fatima. These included the gift to Fenton of an "elephant's tooth" (Donno 1976:197). For the use of ivory horns by chiefs in Sierra Leone today, see Henggeler 1981:59-63.
11. The absence of carved lugs for the attachment of a chain or carrying strap would also indicate that it was not intended for a European client.
12. It is curious that Sloane himself makes no mention of the copper mounts in his catalogue description of the horn. Could he have been responsible for adding them? Or did he ignore them as obviously a later addition?

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